An Interpretation Observed:

Cognitive Distinctions Relevant to the

Historiography of Interpretive Traditions

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Different kinds of epistemological structures require different kinds of historical descriptions. Some idea-complexes, such as folk taxonomies, being largely innate, undergo historical development principally in terms of the stimuli to which they are exposed. In the West, the Age of Exploration introduced Europeans to so many new species that their innate folk taxonomy was overstretched, resulting in its explication, systematization and formalization in Linnaean taxonomy.[1] Other idea-complexes, such as notions of personhood, seem to be highly contingent, dependant on factors not yet fully identified.[2] One sort of epistemological structure that has been enormously important in many places—especially in the West—is the interpretive tradition, a sort of cultural complex that develops around many influential texts and is, in fact, the primary vehicle of their influence. An interpretive tradition is an epistemological complex, a species of belief tradition in which propositions are accepted as

1. Scott Atran, *Cognitive Foundations of Natural History: Towards an Anthropology of Science* (Cambridge, 1990).

2. R. E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently—and Why* (New York, 2003).

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authoritative by virtue of their attribution to a text. All scriptural traditions include interpretive traditions, as do document-oriented legal traditions.

The aim of this article is to describe the cognitive structure of interpretations. I will show that the cognitive structure of interpretations involves mental representations that conserve the semantic content of a text, as opposed to the text's formal properties, and that this semantic content is integrated with other information in semantic memory. Interpretive representations, however, remain distinct from general semantic knowledge by virtue of a metarepresentational tag that specifies at least the fact of their connection to a text. This model carries historiographic implications: (1) the distinction between a proposition and its metarepresentational descriptor allows these to have separate historical trajectories; and (2) the distinction between the fact of a connection and particular connections implies that the history of an interpretation may not be directly related to any particular passage or any particular hermeneutic method. I conclude with a few reflections on humankind as a uniquely historical species.

Interpretation is commonly used to mean quite various things, but it will be used here to refer to what a person thinks a text says. A person's interpretations will be the set of mental representations that the person regards as semantic representations of what the text says. I exclude from this the conventional implication that other equally valid interpretations are possible: such an implication has to do more with the semantics of the English word *interpretation* than with any interesting cognitive distinction, and certainly not those in focus here. I will use the term *hermeneutic theory* to refer to folk theories about the process of interpretation.

The particular interpretation examined here is a biblical one. Biblical interpretation is of particular interest for historical study both because it has a long history in diverse communities, and because no small part of modern hermeneutic theory developed out of and in response to it. The Bible remains an important locus both of interpretation and of hermeneutic theory.

The Power of God

Our focal interpretation took place in a Sunday school class meeting with twelve people present. The ethnographic study that forms the basis for this analysis was carried out at Creekside Baptist Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, from 1997 to 2001.[3] Creekside Baptist is a predominantly white

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3. The names of the church and all informants are pseudonyms.

church, with 350 to 400 attendees on an average Fall or Winter Sunday. Although it is nominally a Baptist church and baptism is postinfancy and by immersion, its doctrine, liturgy, ethics and ethos are not distinctively Baptist. It is affiliated with a loose federation of churches, but, like most Baptist churches, makes decisions in-house. This research is presented in *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism*, from which parts of this article are adapted.[4]

The previous Sunday, the Sunday school class had watched a video by the evangelical theologian R. C. Sproul about God's power; now it had in hand an outline of the main points made during the video. The class leader, John, after opening the class with prayer, described a time when he was caught in an earthquake, and how powerless he had felt. Others then shared similar stories about being just passed over by a tornado, or being at sea during a storm, and how powerless they had felt. John then introduced the topic of God's power:

> John: Well, we're going to think about God and his power, and we had the example several weeks ago, or in one of the earlier lessons, where Jesus stood up in a boat, well, the disciples woke him up from a sleep and he stood up in the boat, calmed the storm and the winds, and the men wondered at this with fear, who is this that even the winds and the storms obey him? So we have a God who, who is uh, infinite, and eternal, and unchangeable in his power, who can rule and overrule those forces in nature. But I've got a question, maybe it's a contradiction of infinite, is God infinite in his power? Jesus tells us in Matthew 19 verse 26, Mark 10.27, Luke 18.27, "for all things are possible with God," and Jesus tells us in Mark 9 verse 23 "all things are possible to him that believes." But are all things possible with God? Are there things that are—another way to look at it—are there things that are not possible with God? Some were mentioned in the tape last week. What are some of those things?
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> Sarah: He cannot lie.
>
> John: He cannot lie. Have a verse for that?
>
> Doug: Titus 1.1 or 2. "God who cannot lie."

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4.   Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2004).

John: Titus 1.1 or 2. Also we've got Hebrews 6.18, where "God swore by an oath, it's impossible that he should lie." What else is it impossible for God to do? What else is it not possible for God to do?

Brenda: He cannot die.

John: He cannot die. Can you think of a verse there?

Doug: It's in the outline: 1 Timothy [laughter all around]. Are they all going to lie, are they all going to rhyme here lie, die, . . .

John: Well in 1 Timothy 1 verse 17, Paul refers to God as the one who is infinite, eternal, immortal, the one and only true God, that God possesses immortality, he cannot die. What else can God not do?

[An interjection and brief discursion are omitted here, but the main question is quickly taken up again.]

Doug: The outline says God cannot sin. [Laughter] Well, I wasn't here last week, so I have to have some help. God cannot sin.

John: Okay. What else? By the way, can you think of a verse for that? Does the outline include a verse?

Doug: No, it doesn't, but all I can think of is his holiness, that his holiness would not allow him to sin.

John: Yeah, it won't allow iniquity.

Doug: That's right.

John: Alright. Other thoughts?

Amy: He cannot deny himself.

John: He cannot deny himself. Though we're faithless he remains faithful because he cannot deny himself. 2 Timothy 2.13. And Isaiah 40, verses 13 to 14. God cannot be instructed. It's not with us, he having all wisdom uh, and, and all truth, nothing that we can do to instruct him.

The interpretation of interest here is that "some things are not possible with God." This interpretation is a bit unusual, as evangelical Bible interpretations go, because it flatly contradicts Jesus' statement that "all things are possible with God." Nonetheless, the class discussion proceeded smoothly—without the awkward silence that often greets a leader's blunder—and most of those present subsequently contributed to the discussion of things impossible for God, each limitation based on one passage or another from the Bible. The contradiction of Jesus' words, after all, did not come out of nowhere: it was the product of certain kinds of inferences.

Interpretations and Semantic Memory

It is clear from the class discussion that the interpretation "not all things are possible with God" is derived not from a single Bible passage but from passages scattered throughout the Bible. It is, in a word, synthetic, depending on the inferential and conversational juxtaposition of verses that have in common only their bearing on the question, "What is not possible for God?"

We will see below that these passages were not part of a predefined set, save insofar as they are passages included in the Bible. The Bible served as a kind of pool from which passages could be selected as they were felt relevant to the question at hand. (This is one aspect of what Brevard Childs has called "canonical criticism."[5]) Yet, the class did not limit itself to quoting the Bible: later in the discussion Stephen Charnock was quoted extensively,[6] and Charnock himself quoted Thomas Aquinas. Furthermore, the study materials included quotations from Augustine and Charnock. The principle of selection from these writers was precisely the same as it was from the Bible: passages were selected based on their *relevance* to the topic at hand.

Relevance is a *semantic* criterion.[7] To be able to determine a text's relevance, one has to represent mentally the text in such a way that its "meaning" or "content" is brought into articulation with one's general knowledge. Use of relevance as a selective criterion thus reveals something very important about evangelicals' interpretations of the Bible:

5. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1979); see also J. A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia, 1984).

6. Steven Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Bellingham, WA, 2002 [1853]).

7. See Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford, 1995).

their interpretations are integrated into and organized in accordance with the principles of general semantic memory. Semantic memory is the vast memory store that constitutes our general knowledge of the world, including such diverse things as the meaning of *ilk*, the quality of fast-food, and the function of the United States' Electoral College. (To describe semantic memory as "knowledge of the world" is a bit misleading, for semantic memory also includes knowledge of fictitious entities such as trolls and unicorns, and their imagined worlds.) Semantic memory probably consists of a variety of partly overlapping organizing principles, with some organizational patterns being restricted to particular semantic domains, while others are domain-general.[8] (There are adaptive, computational reasons for such a mixture of fixity and fluidity.[9]) The important point for the present argument is that interpretations are integrated into this knowledge not by virtue of their *textual basis* or *hermeneutic method*, but by virtue of their *propositional content*.

Evangelicals' Bible interpretations form part of their general knowledge of the world, such that, given a topic, they can easily think of passages relevant to it: in the case at hand, we observe them doing repeated passage searches to find textual support for specific propositions—"God cannot die," "God cannot lie"—and finding for each (except "God cannot sin") textual support from different parts of the canon. The text is integrated into their knowledge not as a sequence of passages but as a set of facts.

It could be otherwise: interpretive knowledge could be organized in a way that such textual features as sequence and proximity are preserved in interpretations, so that Titus 1.1 and 2 Timothy 2.13, used by evangelicals in support of different propositions, would seem to them more closely associated than 2 Timothy 2.13 and Isaiah 40.13-14, simply because of the greater proximity of the first pair. Such minds would automatically make locally contextual interpretations, but would be unable to perceive logical or semantic connections between noncontiguous passages. Implicit prophecy fulfillment and even quotation would be lost on these folks.

The semantic organization of interpretive knowledge has another consequence as well: the historical and world-descriptive statements found in the Bible are brought into articulation with (selective) scientific, archeological and historical findings, leading some evangelicals to develop

8.   See Lawrence A. Hirschfeld and Susan A. Gelman, *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge, 1994); Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion and Science* (London, 1996).

9.   S. A. Kauffman, *The Origins of Order: Self-Organization and Selection in Evolution* (New York, 1993).

cosmological models capable of incorporating—very literally—the Garden of Eden, dinosaurs, the Noatic flood and the Exodus. Inferential articulation—an undeniable feature of the entire history of biblical interpretation—is a consequence of the organization of interpretations in semantic memory.

Metarepresentational Marking

If interpretations are integrated in semantic memory, along with the rest of a person's knowledge of the world, what then marks them as interpretations? An answer to this question may be garnered from the history of the interpretation described above.

The previous Sunday, the class had watched the fifth lesson, "Does God Have a Withered Arm? (God is Omnipotent)" from the popular evangelical theologian R. C. Sproul's video series, *One Holy Passion (The Attributes of God)*. In the video Sproul had actually said very little about limitations on God's omnipotence:

> Oh, you know, you hear the question all the time when you teach seminary, the student comes up and asks, "Professor, do you believe that God is omnipotent?" "Yes, I believe that God is omnipotent." "Well, can God build a rock so big that He can't move it?" Now you've heard that, right? Can God build a rock so big that He can't move it? Now he's got me on the horns of a dilemma. If I say, "No, God can't build a rock so big that He can't move it," I've said that there's something God can't do. And if I say, "Yes, God can't build a rock so big He can't—er, Yes God can build a rock so big that He can't move it," I still have something God can't do—He can't move the rock. And so the students sits there and says, "I got him." But there is a correct answer to that question. The answer to the question is no, God cannot possibly build a rock so big that He couldn't move it, because for God to build a rock so big that He couldn't move it would mean that there would be some point that God had no more power over His creation. Let me say this: the term omnipotent, omni-potent, all potent, all powerful, does not mean literally that God can do anything. The Bible tells us there are certain things that God can't do. He can't die. He can't lie. He can't be God and not be God at the same time and in the same relationship. And contrary to the credulity of certain Christians, God can't make a square circle. Lots of things that God can't do. And one of the things that He can't do is build a rock so big that He suddenly loses His authority and power over it. What omnipotence means is that God

always has power over everything that He creates, including this
rock He wants to build.

The accompanying study guide, which most of the participants had in
hand, made a larger point of limitations on God's omnipotence. It first
raised the issue of limitations on God in a quotation from Augustine:

> We do not put the life of God and the foreknowledge of God under
> any necessity when we say that God must live an eternal life and
> must know all things. Neither do we lessen His power when we say
> He cannot die or be deceived. We call Him omnipotent because he
> does whatever He wills to do and suffers nothing that he does not
> will to suffer. He would not, of course, be omnipotent, if He had to
> suffer anything against His will. It is precisely because He is
> omnipotent that for Him some things are impossible.

The study guide emphasized the limitations on God by including the "Can
God build a rock so large . . ." question as one of three that readers were
to answer as they listened to the videotape, and as one of five points for
review after the videotape was finished. It also asked readers to look up
the limitations on God's power found in Hebrews 6.18 and James 1.13-17,
and suggested for discussion the series of questions—"What are some
things God cannot do? Why can't He? What in His character prevents these
activities?"—a version of which was taken up by the Sunday school class.

Steven Charnock's book, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, although
not mentioned in the video, was quoted twice in the study guide and listed
as a reference for further reading.[10] John, the Sunday school leader, did in
fact read Charnock's Discourse X and reproduced part of it in a handout he
distributed as he ended the class with a lengthy comment:

> In the outline, one of the suggested readings that accompany this
> chapter is Discourse X from Charnock, on the attributes of God, this
> one dealing with the power of God. And the verse that [Charnock]
> uses to introduce this topic [is], "Lo! These are parts of his ways: but
> how little a portion is heard of him? But the thunder of his power
> who can understand? [Job 26.14]. And so Charnock defines God's
> power this way: "The power of God is that ability and strength,
> whereby he can bring to pass whatsoever he pleases, whatsoever

10. Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*.

his infinite wisdom can direct, and whatsoever the infinite purity of his will can resolve."

And so the very things that we were mentioning here, he summarizes the same way. There are certain things that cannot be. And he does a nice way of introducing it, "It's granted that some things God cannot do, or rather as Aquinas and others, it is better to say such things cannot be done than to say God cannot do them, to remove all kind of imputation of weakness on God, because the reason of the impossibility of these things is in the nature of the things themselves." So here we go.

"Some things are impossible in their own nature." Some things are contradictory: vice and virtue, light and darkness, life and death, can't be the same things. They have to be opposite: for God to make this contradiction true is to make himself false. And my understanding of, is that, you know, how opposite this is of the mind set behind some Eastern religions that yes, you can have light and darkness, vice and virtue be the same, on a continuum, not poles apart, but more a circular type of thing. Anyway, certain things, we say, they are impossible in their nature. They can't both be true at the same time.

"Some things are impossible to the nature and being, being of God." Such as, God cannot die. 1 Timothy 6.16 also is there.

"Some things are impossible to the glorious perfections of God." He can't do anything unbecoming of his holiness and goodness; anything unworthy of himself, or against the perfections of his nature. So, he cannot lie, he cannot sin, he cannot deny himself. The second or third line there in item 3: "As he doth actually do whatsoever He doth actually will, so it's possible for Him to do whatsoever it is possible for Him to will. He doth whatsoever He will, and can do whatsoever He can will; but He cannot do what He cannot will; He cannot will any unrighteous thing, and therefore cannot do any unrighteous thing."

And then finally, and one we can take great comfort in, "Some things are impossible to be done, because of God's ordination. Some things are impossible, not in their own nature, but in regard of the determined will of God." And as you flip the page, the second line, "Though it was possible that the cup should pass from our blessed Savior,"—that's where Jesus was praying in Matthew 26, Mark 14, "If possible let this cup pass." Well it was possible that "the cup should pass from our blessed Savior, that is, possible in its own nature, yet it was not possible in regard to the determination of God's will, since he had both decreed and published His will to

redeem man by the passion and blood of His Son. These things God by his absolute power might have done; but upon the account of His decree, they were impossible, because it is repugnant to the nature of God to be mutable . . ."

So the interpretation that God's power is limited is a traditional one, in the sense of being handed on through church doctrine, and, as presented in the class study materials, has an explicit genealogy extending back from John, through R. C. Sproul to Stephen Charnock, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine. Yet this genealogy conceals a major shift in the rationale for belief in God's limited omniscience.

The quotation from Augustine is taken from his *City of God* V.10, in which Augustine is discussing the freedom of the will, arguing that just as God's omniscience and foreknowledge, being necessary to his nature, cannot therefore be said to limit him, so the human freedom to will is necessary to the nature of willing itself. God's omnipotence and foreknowledge are mentioned as an illustration of how essential attributes cannot be said to put someone under necessity. Augustine's argument is philosophical rather than interpretive: he cites no scriptures in the entire chapter, preferring rather to argue on the basis of reason alone. He gives no indication of regarding the proposition "some things are impossible for [God]" as an *interpretation* at all.

By the seventeenth century, however, Protestants were framing the limitations on God's power as *interpretations*, the Reformation having cast doubt on all other paths to knowledge. Stephen Charnock begins his Discourse X by quoting Job 26.14 and casts his overall discussion as an exegesis of the chapter in which this verse is found. His ideas about the power of God are framed as an interpretation of Job 26. In regard specifically to the limitations on God's omnipotence, Charnock cites Ephesians 1.4-5, 1 Timothy 6.16, 2 Timothy 2.13, and Hebrews 6.18 (twice). For its part, the Sunday school class replayed, in simplified, dialogical form, this general rhetorical strategy, citing verses from throughout the Bible—Isaiah 40.13-14, 1 Timothy 1.17, 2 Timothy 2.13, Titus 1.2, Hebrews 6.18—in support of the idea that "not all things are possible with God."

Between Augustine and Charnock, a traditional doctrine was transformed into a traditional interpretation: the idea that God's power has limits came to be regarded as something the Bible says rather than as a proposition to be believed on rational grounds alone. This transformation from doctrine to interpretation was possible because of the cognitive structure of interpretations. The statement "not all things are possible with God" is not intrinsically an interpretation. It is a proposition that someone might come to believe in any number of ways, and which someone might

believe quite apart from consideration of the Bible. What makes this statement an interpretation is the additional representation that it represents the content of verses in the Bible. Its status as an interpretation is part of its cognitive description, not a logical or semantic feature of the proposition itself. The proposition and its status as an interpretation may thus have separate histories.

Moreover, their histories may be different. Table 1 below shows which verses were cited in support of God's limited omniscience by Stephen Charnock, the R. C. Sproul study guide, and the Sunday school class. It is clear that while the proposition, "Some things are not possible for God" is a traditional one, its biblical basis was being reinvented at every step in this transmissive chain. What were being reproduced in this interpretive tradition were a proposition and the assumption that the proposition was an interpretation. But its actual interpretive basis was not being reproduced.

Table 1: The changing basis of God's limited omnipotence

	Augustine	Charnock	Sproul	Sunday School
Ephesians 1.4-5		X		
1 Timothy 6.16		X		
2 Timothy 2.13	*Justification*	X		X
Hebrews 6.18	*philosophical,*	X	X	X
James 1.13-17	*not textual*		X	
Isaiah 40.13-14				X
1 Timothy 1.17				X
Titus 1.2				X

In considering the history of interpretations, then, it is important to distinguish between propositions and their marking as interpretations, because these may have separate histories, and, with respect to the metarepresentational marking, between a general attribution to a text (basis unspecified) and attributions to a text specifying particular passages or methods.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the cognitive structure of interpretation—its semantic integration in memory and its proposition plus metarepresentation form—are cognitive distinctions with implications for the way histories of interpretation must be written. Here I have treated cognition as a fixed constraint on the kinds of histories that humans can have, but historians, anthropologists and cultural psychologists alike are steadily unmasking the cultural and historical plasticity of human cognition. This plasticity extends even to the perceptual level[11] —a processing level often assumed to be largely hardwired—and it is clear that intuitions about what aspects of cognition are contingent must be regarded as tentative and subject to empirical examination.

This raises a serious limitation of the present study. The exploration of cognitive processes involved in textual interpretation and in the representation of textual knowledge has merely begun. It is clear that the kinds of epistemological structures constructed around the Bible have changed markedly over the last two millennia, and continue to vary considerably across communities today. And one encounters still more variation in literary and legal traditions of interpretation. The degree to which the distinctions described here will be relevant to these traditions is an open question, subject to further empirical research.

Yet, while the process of interpretation is historically and culturally malleable, there is reason to suspect that this malleability results from different parameters on common cognitive processes rather than from different cognitive processes altogether. Although histories of interpretation often focus on formal hermeneutic theories, interpretations take place even in the absence of such theories,[12] and in any case hermeneutic theories never *determine* the interpretations actually generated. Interpretation seems to be an intuitive process, requiring little explicit tuition, but one responsive to a wide variety of environmental influences—considerations suggesting that interpretation reflects the activity of a very high level cognitive process, possibly a deep architectural property far too general to be learned. For any such process, the distinctions treated here are relevant. Moreover, the cognitive structures on which I have focused here—semantic memory and metarepresentation— are cognitive structures found in all humans and in other mammals as well.

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11. C. M. Turnbull, "Some Observations Regarding the Experiences and Behavior of the BaMbuti Pygmies," *American Journal of Psychology* 74 (1961): 304-8; Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought.*

12. Malley, *How the Bible Works,* chap. 3.